

A Promise to Keep: Which Bond, Whose Fidelity?

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INTRODUCTION

“One ought not to understand this teaching [of the indissoluble bond] as a kind of metaphysical hypostasis beside or over the personal love of the spouses”¹. These are the words pronounced by Cardinal Walter Kasper before the Extra-ordinary Consistory in February 2014 with which he warns against thinking of the marital bond as having an ontological status of its own apart from the love of the people who are bound by it. For him, attributing too much metaphysical weight to the bond may confuse the debate on the question of granting some form of ecclesial recognition to those living in a second union while their spouse is still alive².

Now the bond, whatever its ontological status, is created by the spouses’ marital promises. Hence, if we want to understand what kind of consistency is proper to the bond, we should begin with a discussion of what is involved in promising in general and then, more in particular, in promising marital fidelity. In what follows, we will begin by looking

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1. W. KASPER, *The Gospel of the Family*, trans. W. Madges, Paulist Press, Mahwah, N.J. 2014, 16.
2. This, all of Kasper’s protestations to the contrary, is the main issue of the Cardinal’s speech and of the subsequent booklet in which the speech was published together with some added material.

at the thought of some highly influential philosophers on the matter, hoping to learn from them, but also wishing to see the roots of some extremely significant conceptual errors on the matter that are prone also to obscure the question of the nature of the marital bond. In due course we will ask the following questions: What is a promise? Does a promise oblige and if yes, why? Why do we promise? To whom or what do we pledge fidelity when we promise? What is specific to the marital promise?

1. THE PROMISE AS A SOCIAL CONVENTION IN HUME AND HOBBS

For David Hume to make a promise and to be faithful to it is not a “natural virtue”³. The word “natural” here will have to be understood in its contrast to “social” or “conventional”. Indeed, “*a promise wou’d not be intelligible, before human conventions had established it; and [...] even if it were intelligible, it wou’d not be attended with any moral obligation*”⁴. The institution of promising exists in a given society because undoubtedly promises are useful and advantageous for it. Hume gives the example of organizing an imminent harvest. If my crops are ripe today and yours will be tomorrow and none of us has enough capacity to do the harvest just by ourselves, then I will ask you to help me today and promise you that I will help you tomorrow⁵. Given that in Hume’s anthropology human beings are essentially egoistic, there is little hope you would help me just out of fellow-feeling: “Men being naturally selfish, or endow’d only with a confin’d generosity, they are not easily induced to perform any action for the interest of strangers, except with a view to some reciprocal advantage, which they had no hope of obtaining but by such a performance”⁶. You will only help me today if you can rest assured that I will help you tomorrow. Without the institution of promising, you will not help me, nor will I help you, and both of us will lose our harvests⁷.

3. D. HUME, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Critical Edition, D. NORTON – M. NORTON (eds.), Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, 333: “There is naturally no inclination to observe promises, distinct from a sense of their obligation; it follows, that fidelity is no natural virtue, and that promises have no force, antecedent to human conventions”.

4. *Ibid.*, 331(original emphasis).

5. Cfr. *ibid.* 334.

6. *Ibid.*, 333.

7. *Ibid.*, 334.

We see that it is no doubt useful to promise. According to this account, *the purpose of the institution of promising is to make people do what we want them to do without having to use force or deceit*. It is a function of the interested commerce of humankind, which is also why for Hume we do not promise to people who are close to us, but only to acquaintances or strangers, that is, to people to whom we do not sense naturally any inclination to do good. It seems that for Hume, there is no need to promise anything to the members of our family or to our friends, given that we will do good to them spontaneously⁸.

Why do promises oblige for Hume? The obligation is due solely to the sanction attached to not maintaining one's word, which is simply this: one will no longer be able to profit from the institution of promising in the future. "When a man says *he promises any thing*, he in effect expresses a *resolution* of performing it; and along with that, by making use of this *form of words*, subjects himself to the penalty of never being trusted again in case of failure"⁹. People who fail to keep their promises will no longer be able to convince others that it is in their interest to help them and thus they will be left without assistance when they need it. It is hence not immoral not to keep a promise; it is rather imprudent and little intelligent. One will only hurt oneself, at least in the long run.

Thomas Hobbes' approach to promising is similar. For him, too, the promise is a creation of society aiming at its benefit. Unlike Hume, however, he does not leave the sanction for breaking a promise simply with the risk of not being trusted in the future. Given that the institution of promising is of paramount importance for the State, Leviathan imposes the obligation created by a promise with the concrete threat of punishment: "Covenants, without the Sword, are but Words, and of no

8. Cfr. *ibid.* 335: "Tho' this self-interested commerce of man begins to take place, and to predominate in society, it does not entirely abolish the more generous and noble intercourse of friendship and good offices. I may still do services to such persons as I love, and am more particularly acquainted with, without any prospect of advantage; and they may make me a return in the same manner, without any view but that of recompensing my past services. In order, therefore, to distinguish those two different sorts of commerce, the interested and the disinterested, there is a *certain form of words* invented for the former, by which we bind ourselves to the performance of any action" (original emphasis).

9. *Ibid.*

strength to secure a man at all”¹⁰. Why do I promise? Again, to make people do what I want them to do. Why do I keep my promises? Because otherwise I will have to pay a fine or be put to jail.

Why do we mention these two accounts here? It seems that this legalistic understanding of promising as social convention is still with us today much more than we may think. Here, a promise is something completely impersonal. The one to whom the promise is made never enters into the picture. A promise has nothing to do with love of the other. The fidelity, if such it is, involved in promising here is but a fidelity to the institution of promising, and ultimately only to the utility of this institution. From this perspective, it becomes difficult to see how a society’s competent authority could not dispense someone of any and all promises made, given that the obligatory nature of these promises resides solely in the threat of sanction imposed by precisely this authority.

The “bond” created by the promise is an external obligation imposed by society for the sake of its general and impersonal benefit but, in given cases, this bond or this obligation – however good for society – may be to the detriment of the individual, who, by promising perhaps did not manage to obtain the benefit he or she had hoped for and that was the motive of the promise in the first place. Hence, it would only seem humane in these cases for the competent authority to release such a one from the bond or obligation created by the promise.

2. THE PROMISE AS FIDELITY TO ONESELF IN KANT AND NIETZSCHE

The following two accounts of promising seem to be diametrically opposed to the previous ones. In Kant and Nietzsche one gets the idea that society is not needed at all for there to exist promises. For Kant, while it is perhaps not all that clear why we promise in the first place, it is evident that the obligation to keep our promises derives from an application of the categorical imperative with its universalizability principle: “*I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should*

10. TH. HOBBS, *Leviathan*, R. TUCK (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK 1996, II, 17, 117.

become a universal law"¹¹. While prior to reflecting about it, I could feel tempted to get myself out of trouble by means of a promise I do not intend to keep, I could not well want lying to become the law of the land. Such a custom would be unreasonable, amounting to abolishing the institution of promising¹². Thus we can say that for Kant the obligation to keep my word derives from reason's necessity not to contradict itself, which means that the fidelity implied in promising is ultimately *a fidelity to myself as rational agent*.

It is true that Kant's confidence in his universalizability principle seems to be exaggerated. It may at times serve as a heuristic principle and thus amount to no more than the common sense question: What would happen if everyone did this?, but as ultimate foundation of morality it may well be wanting. Its greatest weakness, of course, is that it cannot answer the question of motivation: Why should I *want* to be rational, or consistent with myself, which for Kant would be the same as to be moral and just? This problem was raised by a poet like Walt Whitman who famously wrote: "I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself; I am large, I contain multitudes"¹³. But also a philosopher and contemporary follower of Kant's, like Jürgen Habermas shows that he is quite aware of this issue¹⁴.

Further, as Alasdair MacIntyre points out, the universalizability principle already encounters grave difficulties on a much more obvious level. MacIntyre argues, and it seems rightly so, that "it is very easy to see that

11. I. KANT, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, M. GREGOR (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK 1997, 15 (emphasis original).

12. Cfr. *ibid.*: "To inform myself in the shortest and yet infallible way about the answer to this problem, whether a lying promise is in conformity with duty, I ask myself: would I indeed be content that my maxim (to get myself out of difficulties by a false promise) should hold as a universal law (for myself as well as for others) [...]? Then I soon become aware that I could indeed will the lie, but by no means a universal law to lie; for in accordance with such a law there would properly be no promises at all".

13. W. WHITMAN, "Song of Myself", in *ID.*, *Leaves of Grass*, Viking Penguin, New York 1959, 85

14. Cfr. J. HABERMAS, *The Future of Human Nature*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK 2003, 4: "Moral insights effectively bind the will only when they are embedded in an ethical self-understanding that joins the concern about one's own well-being with the interest in justice. Deontological theories after Kant may be very good at explaining how to ground and apply moral norms; but they still are unable to answer the question of why we should be moral *at all*".

many immoral and trivial non-moral maxims are vindicated by Kant's test quite as convincingly – in some cases more convincingly – than the moral maxims which Kant aspires to uphold. So 'Keep all your promises throughout your entire life except one', 'Persecute all those who hold false religious beliefs' and 'Always eat mussels on Mondays in March' will all pass Kant's test, for all can be consistently universalized"¹⁵. The foundation of the moral obligation for promise-keeping would hence seem a little thin in Kant.

What perhaps weighs still heavier is an element his account shares with that of Hume and Hobbes: the person to whom the promise is made is rather disregarded. Promising is not an intersubjective reality and has nothing to do with the love of the other. While for Hume and Hobbes the obligation created by the promise resides in the relation between individual and State, in Kant this obligation is based on the relation of the rational agent with him- or herself. For Kant a promise is an intrasubjective reality.

This last point holds true also for Nietzsche, which is why we have grouped him together with Kant here. In his *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche dedicates a substantive section to the question of "breeding [...] an animal which is *entitled to make promises*"¹⁶, suggesting that the capacity to promise can function as the specific difference of the human being with respect to the animals¹⁷ and presenting it as a privilege rather than a duty. To be able to give one's word as something that can be trusted is a major accomplishment of the will. It is here that we have the case of the sovereign individual, who has "his own independent, enduring will, the man who is *entitled to make promises*. And in him we find a proud consciousness, tense in every muscle, of what has finally been achieved here, of what has become incarnate in him – a special consciousness of

15. A. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Bloomsbury, New York, NY 2013³, 54.

16. F. NIETZSCHE, *The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Douglas Smith, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1998, 39.

17. Cfr. H. ARENDT, *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1998², 245: "Nietzsche, in his extraordinary sensibility to moral phenomena, and despite his modern prejudice to see the source of all power in the will power of the isolated individual, saw in the faculty of promises (the 'memory of the will', as he called it) the very distinction which marks off human from animal life".

power and freedom”¹⁸. The “liberated man, who is really *entitled* to make promises, this master of *free will*”, is the “the owner of an enduring, indestructible will”¹⁹. What distinguishes him from other people is that he “gives his word as something which can be relied on, because he knows himself strong enough to uphold it even against accidents, even ‘against fate’”²⁰. For Nietzsche the promise is “the memory of the will”²¹, and it is in the will that we find both the reason for making promises and the reason for keeping them. We are motivated to promise inasmuch as it is a splendid occasion to exercise our power – which for Nietzsche is why we do everything we do. The obligation to keep our promises derives from our desire for greatness and sovereignty. To break one’s promise means to be servile, weak, and non-sovereign, dependent on the whims of circumstance and changing passion. In other words, it is a question of honor.

Indeed, the capacity to promise reveals much about the human being’s personhood as someone who possesses himself and is, as such, able to anticipate his future²². Someone who were to say, “Yesterday I promised you to do this and that, but so what? Today I’m someone else”, would simply disappear as a person. Thus, Robert Spaemann can place the foundation and guarantee of the promise in the person him- or herself: “By speaking and demanding to be understood, one has engaged in the same personal relation that is presumed in each separate act of promising. The question of how to secure the promise no longer arises. The final security is the refusal to pose the question, a refusal already made when human begins recognize each other, and claim recognition from each other, as persons. The person is a promise”²³, so that someone who

18. NIETZSCHE, *Genealogy*, cit., 41.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*, 40.

22. Cfr. R. SPAEMANN, *Persons. The Difference between ‘Someone’ and ‘Something’*, Oxford University Press, trans. O. O’Donovan, Oxford, UK 2006, 223-224: “The practice of promising throws a shaft of light on what it is to be a person [...] When we make an actual promise in history [...] we rise above our normal immersion in the stream of time. We do not leave it to the course of events to decide what we shall do at a given point in the future, nor do we leave it to whatever attitude or state of mind, wishes or priorities we may happen to have at that time”.

23. *Ibid.*, 223. For a clarification of the suggestive idea that the person is a promise, cfr. R. SPAEMANN - H. ZABOROWSKI, “An Animal that Can Promise and Forgive”, in *Communio* 34 (2007) 515: “We are natural beings like other living things that have

is not wont to keep his promises “degrades himself, degrades the promise that he, as a person, is”²⁴.

The question of promising is indeed intimately bound up with the issue of personal identity as Paul Ricoeur quite insightfully points out: “We can understand two different things by identity. One is the permanence of an immutable substance which time does not affect. [...] But there is another model of identity, one presupposed by our previous model of the promise. [...] The problem of the promise is precisely that of maintaining a self in the face of what Proust called the vicissitudes of the heart”²⁵. Hence we may say that Nietzsche is getting at something profoundly true: at least part of the reason we promise is to maintain our identity in time and part of the reason of its obligatory nature is truly our honor, a fidelity to ourselves.

And yet here too, we have to ask ourselves about the role, if any, of the person *to whom* the promise is made. What is his or her importance? As Ricoeur himself points out: “The obligation to maintain one’s self in keeping one’s promises is in danger of solidifying into the Stoic rigidity of simple constancy, if it is not permeated by the desire to respond to an expectation, even to a request coming from another”²⁶. Nietzsche’s approach would entirely seem to fall under this criticism, since here it does not seem to matter to whom the promise is made. Incidentally, as Gabriel Marcel incisively explains, on this account it does not even seem important *what* is being promised:

To make it a point of honour to fulfil a commitment what else is this but putting an accent on the supra-temporal identity of the subject who contracts it and carries it out? And so I am brought to think that this identity has a validity in itself, whatever the content of my promise may be. This identity is the one important thing to maintain, however absurd the

wishes and desires and pleasure and fear and dread, and at the same time, we are beings that can relate themselves to this nature. Within this relation lies the promise that the person is, that a being, which can also feel a duty toward another, then also fulfills this duty – for that we have no guarantee; but rather, this is a promise”.

24. SPAEMANN – ZABOROWSKI, “An Animal,” cit., 516.

25. P. RICOEUR, “Approaching the Human Person”, in *Ethical Perspectives* (1999) 53.

26. ID., *Oneself as Another*, trans. K. Blamey, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1994, 267.

particular commitment may appear, to the eyes of a spectator, through my rashness or weakness in undertaking it²⁷.

In this context, then, Marcel sees the great danger of confusing fidelity with pride: “A fidelity to another of which I was myself the ground, the spring, and the centre [...] would expose [...] the lie at the heart of that existence which it shapes”²⁸. This lie consists in “the contention that fidelity, despite appearances, is never more than a mode of pride and self-regard”, and it “unquestionably robs of their distinctive character the loftiest experiences that men think they have known”²⁹.

If what is at stake in promising is simply a *fidelity to myself* in terms of a desire for self-consistency as in Kant, or in terms of a sense of honor as in Nietzsche, then it is I myself who can also dispense myself from my promise. Others could come to my aid by trying to help me see that keeping a word once given has now become unreasonable given the new circumstances. They could tell me to swallow my pride, admit my failure, and go on with my life.

3. THE PROMISE AS INTERSUBJECTIVE REALITY IN AQUINAS, MARCEL AND RICOEUR

3.1 *A Commitment to the Other*

It is truly curious how the philosophers we have mentioned above, while taking into account important and valid aspects of promising, were nonetheless able to disregard its probably most important characteristic: a promise is inherently a promise *to* someone. Even Paul Ricoeur thinks that “it is easy to overlook” what he calls the “dyadic structure of promising”, and he surmises that perhaps “Kant contributed to this by his treatment of the false promise as an inner contradiction to a maxim in which a person involves only himself or herself”³⁰. But is it truly so dif-

27. G. MARCEL, *Being and Having*, trans. K. Farrer, Dacre Press, Westminster 1949, 53.

28. *Ibid.*, 54.

29. *Ibid.*, 53.

30. RICOEUR, *Oneself as Another*, cit., 266.

difficult to see that it is not *fear* of punishment (Hobbes) or of disadvantage (Hume) or of self-contradiction (Kant) or of the admittance of weakness (Nietzsche) but rather love of the other that is at the basis of the obligatory nature of promises? In this very sense Ricoeur continues: “It is, in truth, at the very first stage, that of firm intention, that the other is implied: a commitment that did not involve doing something that the other could choose or prefer would not be more than a silly wager”³¹. Fidelity to one’s word is fidelity to the one to whom one has given it, and this not for fear but for love of him or her. Not even Guy Mansini, in his *Promising and the Good* – a work that is otherwise extremely helpful – quite managed to get himself to say this. Rather, his main thesis is that the binding nature of promises derives from the *good* that one promises to the other³². The more this thesis is sustained by examples, the more it becomes improbable, at least if taken literally. Thus he writes: “The obligation to go to the post office on someone’s behalf comes from the good of doing just that thing”³³. Is the purported fact that going to the post office is a good really the reason for why one should keep one’s promise to do so on someone else’s behalf? How could going to the post office be a good in the first place if it were not a good *for someone*? It seems that it is the *other*, to whom we have made a pledge and who now relies on us, who is the primary reason for why we should keep our promises. It is a question of fidelity to him or her. Here Gabriel Marcel really seems to get at the heart of what is at stake in giving one’s word:

There is no commitment purely from my own side; it always implies that the other being has a hold over me. All commitment is a response. A one-sided commitment would not only be rash but could be blamed as pride. The notion of pride, indeed, plays a part of paramount importance in this discussion. It seems to me that it is essential to show that pride cannot be the principle upon which fidelity rests. As I see it, and despite appearances

31. *Ibid.*, 267.

32. G. MANSINI, *Promising and the Good*, Sapientia Press of Ave Maria University, Naples, Florida 2005, x: “The obligation to keep promises is not an artifact of the will of the one who promises. [...] The source of the obligation to fidelity to promises is chiefly the good promised”.

33. *Ibid.*, 38.

to the contrary, fidelity is never fidelity to one's self, but is referred to what I called the hold the other being has over us³⁴.

Fidelity to one's word is fidelity to someone else, to a friend to the beloved; it is a response to someone. In promising then, I am not primarily bound by society, the State, my logic or my honor, though all these surely enter in various degrees, but I am bound to the *other*, in whom I have raised expectations and who now relies on me.

3.2 *Why We Promise*

Why do we promise, then? For St. Thomas there is more than one answer, but the first and foremost reason is that we promise to others for their good: "We promise something to a man for his own profit; since it profits him that we should be of service to him, and that we should at first assure him of the future fulfilment of that service"³⁵. Here we need to underline that the Angelic Doctor's anthropological presuppositions are very different from those of Hume's, for instance. For the British empiricist all human beings are naturally selfish. For St. Thomas, in contrast, "it is natural to all men to love each other"³⁶. With this he does not mean that people are not capable of hatred or selfishness; it just means that it is these latter that need explanation and not love and benevolence, which are natural and spontaneous. Now "love consists especially in this, that the lover wills the good for his loved one"³⁷. Not only the thing promised, but already the promise itself is already a good, inasmuch as it virtually contains within it the thing promised, which is "why we thank not only a giver, but also one who promises to give"³⁸. Promises are among the goods we wish for the people we love.

34. MARCEL, *Being and Having*, cit., 46.

35. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa theologia* II-II, 88, 4.

36. ID., *Summa contra gentiles*, III, 117.

37. *Ibid.*, III, 90, 6.

38. Cfr. ID., *Summa theologia* II-II, 88, 5, ad 2: "He who promises something gives it already in as far as he binds himself to give it: even as a thing is said to be made when its cause is made, because the effect is contained virtually in its cause. This is why we thank not only a giver, but also one who promises to give".

In which way is a promise, already prior to its actual fulfillment, a good for the beloved? According to Hannah Arendt, promises establish “islands of certainty in an ocean of uncertainty”³⁹. Through promises people can coordinate their activity. It is true, promises are useful for the individual and for society. We can imagine a match between two soccer teams. In one team, players have agreed to play on certain positions: one promised to guard the goal, others committed to defensive tasks, again others agreed to play in midfield or forward positions. In the other team, the players were not able to agree on their positions. No one wanted to make a commitment to the other to cover a certain area, so they will leave things up to the way each player feels at the moment. As a result, they end up entering the field even without an assigned goalie. If we suppose that all the players on both teams have similar individual capacities, then there will be no question as to which team will win. As Hannah Arendt keeps insisting, in order to achieve anything significant in life, people have to act together⁴⁰. They can act together, only if they are bound together by mutual promises. Thus, people benefit from promises collectively the moment they enter into a common endeavor.

But already simply as an individual someone receiving a promise earns a decisive advantage as it will be possible “to rely on its performance, so as to be able to presume upon it safely in his or her own plans for action”⁴¹. Anyone who has ever needed to organize an event will know the difference between a collaborator who responds to a request for a particular kind of aid with the words, “If I get a chance, perhaps I will do it”, and one who says, “I will be there, and I will do it”. Only the latter words are a real help. Only here the person responsible can consider the task done, stop looking for someone to whom to delegate

39. ARENDT, *Human Condition*, cit., 244.

40. Cfr. *ibid.*, 244-245: “We mentioned before the power generated when people gather together and ‘act in concert’, [...] The force that keeps them together [...] is the force of mutual promise or contract. [...] The sovereignty of a body of people bound and kept together, not by an identical will which somehow magically inspires them all, but by an agreed purpose for which alone the promises are valid and binding, shows itself quite clearly in its unquestioned superiority over those who are completely free, unbound by any promises and unkept by any purpose”.

41. SPAEMANN, *Persons*, cit., 225.

it, and attend to other duties. The promise is the good that the lover wills for the beloved. We promise because we love.

As much as we love the other, we may still consider whether a promise is an *adequate* good to give him or her. Is it morally licit to promise? St. Thomas poses himself the objection that our freedom is the greatest good that God has given to us and it would seem to be inappropriate deliberately to deprive ourselves of it by placing our will under necessity⁴². Gabriel Marcel even goes so far as to raise the question whether there is not a sense in which every promise is a lie:

At the moment of my commitment, I either (1) arbitrarily assume a constancy in my feelings which it is not really in my power to establish, or (2) I accept in advance that I shall have to carry out, at a given moment, an action which will in no way reflect my state of mind when I do carry it out. In the first case I am lying to myself, in the second I consent in advance to lie to someone else⁴³.

I have no power over how I will feel tomorrow. If I tell a friend today that I will come to visit him tomorrow, because today that seems to me a good thing, I may betray my friend if tomorrow the visit no longer appears good to me and I no longer feel like it. If I go anyway, I will be insincere; if I do not go at all, I will have gone against my word, but the promise, to the extent that it implied not only an exterior behavior but a personal involvement, will be broken in any case, if not by my omission, then by my insincerity.

Furthermore, given that I am constantly changing, by promising perhaps I betray my future self, the person that I am becoming of whom I do not know yet whether he should then want to be burdened by the

42. Cfr. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa theologiae* II-II, 88, 4, obj. 1: "It would seem that it is not expedient to take vows. It is not expedient to anyone to deprive himself of the good that God has given him. Now one of the greatest goods that God has given man is liberty whereof he seems to be deprived by the necessity implicated in a vow".

43. MARCEL, *Being and Having*, cit., 50. cfr. also RICOEUR, *Oneself as Another*, cit., 267-268, where this passage is discussed.

commitments I make for him now⁴⁴. Again, the question is raised, “Can a commitment exist that is not a betrayal?”⁴⁵

We have presented these two objections together, because they can be responded to by a single fundamental consideration, which at the same time highlights another important reason for why we promise. To begin with, let us have a look at the response St. Thomas gives to the way he had formulated his objection, an objection that has not lost anything of its pertinence along the centuries. By promising we do not lose our freedom, but we actualize it. Freedom is freedom for the good, and the firmer the will is fixed on the good, the freer it is. Aquinas points to the fact that God and the saints cannot sin, but this does not amount to a reduction of freedom but to its perfection⁴⁶. Now by promising we give firmness to our will⁴⁷, which is also one of the reasons why according to the Angelic Doctor an act done because of a vow or promise is better than the same act done without a prior binding of the will. In the former case the good is willed more firmly: “A vow fixes the will on the good immovably and to do anything of a will that is fixed on the good belongs to the perfection of virtue”⁴⁸.

Here Thomas looks not only at the actual performance of an act but at its genesis. An act born of a virtuous disposition is performed with more stability, joy, and ease than the same act done without such an active disposition, though from the outside it may be difficult to detect who is truly courageous and who is simply acting as a courageous person would do; who is truly temperate and who is merely continent. Likewise, an act that is generated by a promise is performed with greater stability, with a firmer will, and hence it is more virtuous. Here we see

44. Cfr. MARCEL, *Being and Having*, cit., 51: “Is there, then, such a thing as a basic fidelity, a primal bond, which I break every time I make a vow [...]? This primal bond can only be what some people have taught me to call fidelity to myself. Myself, they will say, is what I betray when I so bind myself. Myself: not my being but my becoming; not what I am today but what I shall perhaps be tomorrow”.

45. *Ibid.*

46. Cfr. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa theologiae* II-II, 88, 4, ad 1: “Even as one’s liberty is not lessened by one being unable to sin, so, too, the necessity resulting from a will firmly fixed to good does not lessen the liberty, as instanced in God and the blessed”.

47. Cfr. *ibid.*, II-II, 88, 4: “By vowing we fix our wills immovably on that which it is expedient to do”.

48. *Ibid.*, II-II, 88, 6.

that Nietzsche's account is not all wrong: being able to promise is an excellence, a virtue, it bespeaks a oneness with oneself, to the point that Paul Ricoeur makes of the promise a paradigm for personal identity as we have seen above⁴⁹.

It is as if to the objection that Marcel puts to himself, namely, that I must not promise because I do not know who I will be tomorrow, St. Thomas along with Ricoeur would answer that I *must* promise so that I *will* know who I will be tomorrow. A promise is what allows me to maintain my personal identity over time, it is the way in which I relate to that part of my life that exists in the mode of anticipation of the future. A promise strengthens the will, it gives unity to the moral subject. As Robert Spaemann puts it, the goal is virtue, the capacity to rely on oneself⁵⁰.

3.3 *The Reasons for the Binding Power of Promises*

Why, then, on this account, do promises bind? Paul Ricoeur can think of three reasons. There is indeed such a thing as my personal honor, which consists in maintaining a recognizable identity over time: "To keep a promise is to sustain oneself within the identity of one who today speaks and tomorrow will do. This sustaining oneself announces an esteem of self"⁵¹. By breaking a promise I implicitly say that I am no longer the same now as I was then. I become invisible as a person, a being capable of owning and leading his life over time and become reduced to a Lockean self, who is but an accumulation of instances without inherent unity or continuity.

But there is, of course, also the *other* to whom the promise is made, who has a rightful expectation of me to do as I said, who relies on me:

49. Cfr. RICOEUR, "Approaching the Human Person", cit., 53. Cfr. also ID., *Oneself as Another*, cit., p.118: "When we speak of ourselves, we in fact have available to us two models of permanence in time which can be summed up in two expressions that are at once descriptive and emblematic: character and keeping one's word".

50. Cfr. SPAEMANN, *Persons*, cit., 225: "The purpose of this effort is what we call 'virtue': conditioning one's nature to reliable self-determination, integrating the various impulses with the goal of actually achieving what one wishes to achieve. What is at stake is the ability to rely on oneself".

51. RICOEUR, "Approaching the Human Person", cit., 50.

“One always makes a promise to someone [...]: it is because someone is counting on me and expecting me to keep my promise that I feel that I am connected”⁵². To make a promise that I do not intend to keep or of which I do not know how I will be able to keep it, is to do him violence⁵³. It is an act of injustice. A false or broken promise is not only a thing between me and an impersonal society, nor just a matter between me and myself, but first of all an issue between me and the other and of the love that governs interhuman relationships.

Third, for Ricoeur there is the respect I owe to the institution of language, which binds me to others and allows me to communicate: “The obligation to keep one’s promise is equivalent to the obligation to preserve the institution of language to the extent that language rests on the confidence everyone has in everyone else’s word”⁵⁴. Language is oriented to truth; its purpose is to reveal reality, to be the “house of being”⁵⁵. It may not be a coincidence that in many languages the expression “to give one’s word” is a synonym for “promising”. By speaking, by saying a word to others, we promise them reality. Hence Erik Erikson can say, “A spoken word is a *pact*”⁵⁶. Indeed, the word binds us to being and binds us to each other. Such is our innate trust in the affirmative power of the word, that says and affirms reality, that for the human mind it is much easier to understand affirmations than it is to understand negations and that our spontaneous attitude towards anything said or written is to believe it. Suspicion and mistrust are always secondary phenomena. Inasmuch as we are beings who “have the word”⁵⁷, the institution of language mediates our access to reality, it allows us to not only to relate to others, but is at the very foundation

52. *Ibid.*

53. Cfr. ID., *Oneself as Another*, cit., 266: “The false promise is a figure of the evil of violence in the use of language, on the plane of interlocution (or of communication)”.

54. RICOEUR, “Approaching the Human Person”, cit., 50.

55. Cfr. M. HEIDEGGER, *Pathmarks*, W. MCNEILL (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK 1998, 254.

56. E. ERIKSON, “The Problem of Ego Identity”, in *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 4 (1956) 70.

57. Cfr. ARISTOTLE, *Politics*, trans. E. Barker, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK 1995, 10-11 (1253a10): “Man alone of the animals is furnished with the faculty of language” (λόγον δὲ μόνον ἄνθρωπος ἔχει τῶν ζῴων).

of our spiritual life, allowing for our thought to be actualized. Romano Guardini formulates it in these terms:

Man by his nature is in a dialogue. His mental life is ordained to be in communication. [...] Language is not only the means by which we communicate conclusions, but mental life and activity are carried on in the process of speech. [...] Language is not a system of signs by means of which two monads exchange ideas but it is the very realm of consciousness in which every man lives⁵⁸.

Thus we see why the institution of language deserves to be respected, why promises are not to be taken lightly and why they are binding. While Ricoeur's appeal to the institution of language echoes a bit Hume's and Hobbes' appeal to society, inasmuch as language is a social reality, what the French thinker is trying to get at goes much beyond the concerns of the British philosophers. What is at stake is not simply a social convention but the very possibility of having conventions in the first place, i.e., the possibility itself of forming a society, of entering into relationship with oneself and with others.

On this account, then, which takes into consideration the dyadic structure of promising, i.e., the basic fact that promises are *to* someone, what is the nature of the bond? The bond would seem to reside in or even *be* the relationship between the one who gives and the one who receives the promise. The obligation is *to the other*; we are *obliged* to other because we love him or her, love being the reason we made our promise in the first place. It is the same love for the other that was the reason for making our promise that is now the reason for our keeping it.

This is certainly evident in our dealings with our family and friends. But how is this applicable to social interactions, such as contracts, which are forms of promises given also to strangers? Even here this account is valid if by love we do not understand a romantic feeling but the fundamental benevolence that governs the interaction between a person and his fellowmen. Again, "it is natural to all men to love each other"⁵⁹, that

58. R. GUARDINI, *The World and the Person*, trans. S. Lange, Henry Regnery Company, Chicago 1965, 130.

59. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa contra gentiles*, III, 117.

is, to wish each other well. Saint Thomas could say such a thing because he believed that the human person's greatest good was not an individual private good, but a common good⁶⁰. My greatest good is precisely not just my good, but *our* good. If you are well, we are well, and then I am truly well only if we are well. Why should I still honor my part of the terms of a contract when the other has already fulfilled his and I got what I wanted? It is for the sake of the other's good that I do it, a good that can motivate me as much as my own. This is what Robert Spaemann gets at when he writes, "At one time the concept of love was thought of as a metamorphosis of self-interests, as the self-transcendence of a rational being, on account of which the reality of the other in its own teleology immediately became a motive of action"⁶¹. He then continues by referring to Leibniz' profound definition of benevolence: "*Delectatio in felicitate alterius*, 'Joy in the happiness of others'"⁶².

3.4 *Dispensations*

Under which conditions, then, can one be dispensed from one's promises? If keeping one's promise is primarily an act of fidelity not to the State, nor to oneself, but to the other, then it is the other who can normally dispense. Dispensation may be asked for on account of new, supervening circumstances that make fulfilling one's promise significantly more difficult or cause it to collide with unforeseen new obligations. At times, we even dispense ourselves, when the other is not at hand or when he unreasonably insists on the fulfillment of a promise given under completely different circumstances. As Spaemann puts it, "Of course, there are promises from which we excuse ourselves on the ground of

60. St. Thomas argues that inasmuch as God is the common good of the universe, it is natural for a rational creature to love God more than it loves itself. Cfr. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa theologiae*, I, 60, 5: "Since God is the universal good, and under this good both man and angel and all creatures are comprised, because every creature in regard to its entire being naturally belongs to God, it follows that from natural love angel and man alike love God before themselves and with a greater love".

61. R. SPAEMANN, *Happiness and Benevolence*, trans. J. Alberg, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Ind. 2000, 78.

62. *Ibid.* Cfr. G. LEIBNIZ, "Codex Iuris Gentium (Praefatio) (1693)", in ID., *Political Writings*, P. RILEY (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK 1988, 171.

urgent necessity that imposes duties inconsistent with them”⁶³. If I am heading for a dinner appointment and on the way become witness of an accident, suddenly finding myself called upon to aid the people involved in it, I can reasonably count on the others to dispense me from my promise to be at a certain place at a certain time. Without entering into a casuistry, however, we can insist, with Spaemann that one thing can *never* be the ground for a dispensation: “It can never be a reason for non-performance that the promiser simply asserts that he has changed his mind”⁶⁴. Given that, as Ricoeur puts it, a promise is a redoubled intention: “the intention not to change my intention”⁶⁵, the not-changing one’s mind was exactly the content of the promise.

4. THE MARITAL PROMISE AND OTHER “LIFE PROMISES”

In the following section, we will ask ourselves what is special about the marital promise. Doing so, we will also touch upon what Guy Mansini aptly calls “life promises” in general⁶⁶.

4.1 *The Specificity of the Marital Promises: Forming a Community of Destiny*

For Spaemann, what distinguishes a marital promise from other promises is that their irrevocability is part of the content of what is being promised, with the result that here two people form a “community of destiny”⁶⁷. What makes us ask for dispensation of our promises, and what makes us gladly grant this dispensation if we are being asked for it, are the strides of fate: new, unforeseeable circumstances that change the whole context

63. SPAEMANN, *Persons*, cit., 226.

64. *Ibid.*

65. RICOEUR, *Oneself as Another*, 268.

66. Cfr. MANSINI, *Promising and the Good*, cit., 71-83; 137-144.

67. Cfr. SPAEMANN, *Persons*, cit., 228, where the English translation speaks of a “lifelong sharing of destinies”. The original German, however, indeed speaks of a “lifelong community of destiny”, a “lebenslange Schicksalsgemeinschaft”: ID., *Personen: Versuche über den Unterschied zwischen “etwas” und “jemand”*, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 1996, 243.

in which a promise was made. Now the marital promise is a promise by which the spouses tell each other: *whatever* may happen, whatever destiny holds in store for us, I pledge my fidelity to you, in sickness or health, for better or worse. Thus by the very intention of the promise, the spouses give each other an *unconditional* pledge. By saying, “in good times and in bad [...] until death do us part” the spouses promise each other not to ask to be dispensed nor to dispense each other.

The nature of the marital promise is such that it radically changes the spouses relationship. Its idea is that it is capable of turning strangers into kin. Even if husband and wife were mutually to agree on dispensing each other from their marital vows, this could not be done, inasmuch as their vows have instituted between them a relation of kinship that is no longer in their power to change⁶⁸. The case is similar to that of a father and a son who wanted to dispense each other from their father-son relationship. They’d be attempting the impossible. The kinship established by the biological fact of generation ensures that the father remains the father, the son remains the son. And this is true even if the kinship is established by the legal act of adoption. The idea of marriage is that a marital promise can establish kinship as well, so that Adam, after having been led to Eve, can say in all truth: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (*Gen 2,23*) – which means saying precisely this: “She is my kin”.

How is it possible to make such a promise? Can one truly build a common life in the face of fate? Very often things happen in life that are completely out of our power: illness, infertility, economic difficulties, problems with the children. In this situation – called the general human condition – how is it possible to promise one’s life, including what one will want in the future, and not just the authenticity of one’s emotions, including only what one feels at the present?

Here Robert Spaemann offers us a profound reflection when he suggests that by exchanging the marital vows, the spouses do not simply commit to hang on to their promise with an iron will, even if they should come to feel differently, even if they should come to regret their

68. S. HAHN, *Kinship by Covenant. A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God’s Saving Promises*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2009.

choice and change their minds⁶⁹. Rather, the marital promise implies the promise to do everything in one's power to prevent coming into situations that would incline one to reconsider one's commitment to the other. While our feelings are not under our immediate control, our day-to-day decisions are. It is by the big and small choices we make every day that we develop our character and personality. We are constantly changing, and our choices are a major factor in this process. According to Spaemann, then, the marital promises imply not viewing "the growth of one's personality as an independent variable that may or may not turn out to be compatible in some degree with the growth of the other's personality"⁷⁰. Thus the question, "What effect will such and such a choice have on the relationship with my spouse?" will become the decisive criterion for any decision that a married person will have to make. By assuming the married state, a person freely renounces the privilege of making choices solely on the basis of personal preference. If, as a single person, I live in Rome and get a job offer in the United States, the only question I need to ask is whether I'd like the job or not. If I'm married I will also need to ask my wife if she wants to move with me, and if not, what it would mean for our relationship to leave her in another country and come home to her just once a month. These are the kind of choices that are entirely entrusted to our freedom and that make our marriages work out or fail.

However, in the journey of a common life, there will always be some things that truly just happen, events that are completely unrelated to our prior choices and for which we carry no responsibility at all. But even here, a married couple is not entirely at the mercy of fate. While by definition we cannot choose what merely happens, we can always choose how to respond to it. As Spaemann writes, "Marriage is predicated on the capacity of persons to create a structure for their life that

69. SPAEMANN, *Persons*, cit., 226-227: "Marriage is no ordinary promise to perform something, which one can still go through with when one has no mind to, or no longer feels the special interest that inclined one to the promise in the first place. With the marriage vow two people tie their fortunes together irrevocably – or that, at any rate, is what the vow intends. This promise could hardly be kept if one were in fact to change one's mind fundamentally".

70. *Ibid.*, 227.

is independent of unforeseen occurrences, delivering themselves from the control of chance by deciding once and for all in advance how such occurrences will be dealt with”⁷¹. Being married means that some options one would otherwise have to react to a blow of fate are closed. However, no longer having all the theoretical options open does not mean one is no longer free. It just means that one’s range of options has become delimited⁷². But one could not possibly have actualized all the options anyway. Here the married person is not in a situation that is qualitatively different from the general human predicament: the moment we walk through one door, we close all the others. As Maurice Blondel convincingly points out, “[w]e do not go forward, we do not learn, we do not enrich ourselves except by closing off for ourselves all roads but one and by impoverishing ourselves of all that we might have known or gained otherwise. [...] I must commit myself under the pain of losing everything”⁷³. Freedom is given to be given, and only by being given it is actualized. By wanting to keep open all options, we do not choose anything. But then soon enough all the options we had or thought we had will close themselves off just by themselves.

4.2 *Life Promises in the Face of Death*

The same holds true for the other kind of promises that are for life: religious vows or the promise of priestly celibacy. Here, too, people give definitive shape to their lives, by closing off all other roads but one; here, too, they have to deliberately cultivate their vocation, asking themselves how their individual small choices and bigger projects will impact their attitude toward their state of life. Making a life promise, whether it be making a marital promise, by taking religious vows or by promising

71. *Ibid.*, 228.

72. Cfr. *ibid.*, 227: “At every stage of one’s growth one is aware of the meaning it has for the other and for the other’s growth. This is a very considerable restriction of our room to manoeuvre, but it is not a restriction of our *freedom*. For we could not in any case exhaust the whole range of possibilities. With every possibility we choose, we cancel others. If we do not wish to pay that price, we can never grasp the possibilities we have, and so never actually realize freedom”.

73. M. BLONDEL, *Action (1893). Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice*, trans. O. Blanchette, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Ind. 2003, 4.

priestly celibacy, we intend to dispose of our entire future, look at our life as a whole and thus, as Mansini rightly points out, already anticipate death⁷⁴.

A culture in which people increasingly do not believe in eternal life and tend to think of death as total annihilation, the thought of death can only be frightening and paralyzing and will thus be avoided at all costs. Said the other way round: If I am unable to face the thought of death, then I will also be unable to look at my life as a whole and hence be unable to make a life promise⁷⁵. I will be unable to promise “until death do us part”, and be much prone to see my life as a succession of unrelated events without any inherent unity.

According to some authors, our present culture has fallen prey to a “chronological atomism”, that is, “an understanding of life as composed of interchangeable and essentially identical units of time”⁷⁶. Forgetting that there is a life cycle may lead to bizarre situations. Thus, at one point Max Scheler recounts his strange encounter with an elderly man who behaved as if he were 18 years old⁷⁷. His was a case of a clinically attested mental illness. And yet many of our contemporaries live in an analogous way without literally having a mental problem. Their difficulty rather lies in their tendency to see life like a random sum of disparate parts,

74. MANSINI, *Promising and the Good*, cit., 76: “To promise something for life makes us contemplate death. When we marry, we contemplate the death of ourselves and our spouses. Priestly or religious promising also has us look forward to death”.

75. Cfr. *ibid.*: “If we are a people who cannot face death, as is commonly alleged, then we must also be a people who cannot face promising for life. Now, the passing of Christianity makes it harder for us to keep death daily before our eyes, since we think of it as personal annihilation. [...] If it really is true that I cannot look squarely at death, however, then I cannot really make a life promise”.

76. THE PRESIDENT’S COUNCIL ON BIOETHICS, *Beyond Therapy. Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Happiness*, Regan Books, New York 2003, 185.

77. Cfr. M. SCHELER, “Repentance and Rebirth”, in ID., *On the Eternal in Man*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 2010, 45: “In a German lunatic asylum, some years ago, I came across an old man of seventy who was experiencing his entire environment on the plane of development reached in his nineteenth [sic: German: eighteenth] year. That doesn’t mean that the man was still lost amid the actual objects making up his world when he was a boy of eighteen, that he saw his home of those days, with its attendant people, streets, towns, etc. No, he saw, heard and experienced nothing but what was going on around him in the room, but he lived it all as the boy of eighteen he once was, with all that boy’s individual and general impulses and ambitions, hopes and fears”.

while instead life is more like a symphony, where each part, precisely in its difference from all the others, is related in a meaningful and quasi-necessary way to the whole, making the whole beautiful⁷⁸.

4.3 *Life Promises in a Vision of Fruitfulness*

We would like to suggest that it is not only our contemporaries' intolerance of the thought of death that accounts for their inability to promise their lives. As Guy Mansini aptly puts it: "What is the same in marriage vows, priestly celibacy, and religious chastity [...] is that they all bear on the body and the sexuality of the body. Life promises, which look toward death, are dispositions of the procreative power that looks beyond it"⁷⁹. On the natural level, the response to our mortality is our fruitfulness⁸⁰, and it is no accident that life promises, in which we regard our lives as a whole, would dispose precisely of our capacity to be fruitful. While death is the end of life in the one sense of "end" (i.e., when it's over), fruitfulness is the end of life in the other sense (i.e., what gives meaning to it). It is not only if we shun the thought of death, but also if we no longer perceive an aim or end to give meaning to our lives that we will not be able to see our lives as a whole and to commit our entire lives in a promise. In other words, to be able to promise our lives, we need the sense of having a goal, a mission, a call to some kind of fruitfulness. As Pope Francis beautifully puts it, "Promising love for ever is possible when we perceive a plan bigger than our own ideas and undertakings, a plan which sustains us and enables us to surrender our future entirely to the one we love"⁸¹.

The problem with contemporary culture that makes it so difficult for people to promise is that essentially they have lost the idea of love's fruitfulness. Jesus tells his disciples what we are entitled believe he tells every human being: I "appointed you to go and bear fruit that will

78. Cfr. PRESIDENT'S COUNCIL ON BIOETHICS, *Beyond Therapy*, cit., 185.

79. MANSINI, *Promising and the Good*, cit., 139.

80. Cfr. L. KASS, *Life, Liberty and the Defense of Dignity, The Challenge for Bioethics*, Encounter Books, San Francisco 2002, 273: "Children and their education [...] are life's – and wisdom's – answer to mortality".

81. FRANCIS, Encyclical Letter *Lumen fidei*, June 29, 2013, n. 52.

remain” (*Jn* 15:16). Any composite reality derives its unity from its end or aim. Life can have a unity only if it has a purpose, an end, or goal. Jesus tells us that this purpose is fruitfulness, and prior to the modern age his words would have been self-evident to any reader or listener. There is more to life than just living. If there is nothing we desire more than living, then soon enough we will begin to loathe living. There is hardly anything that people desire more in their lives than a mission, something to live and possibly to die for.

Until recently it was very clear to people that this noble striving was naturally related to the family. Recognizing oneself as a son or daughter one appreciates and accepts the original gift of life. Responding in gratitude to the gift of life that one has freely received, one becomes aware of a calling to pass this life on in love: to become husband and wife who together are called to become father and mother⁸². For most people it is in the family that they begin to live for others, that they begin to respond to their innate vocation to a common life lived in a love that is fruitful. Love’s fruitfulness then confirms the marital bond and is itself a reason for its indissolubility, inasmuch as the bond is oriented to being objectified in the common children, who for their deepest identity depend on the permanence of the relationship from which they spring.

Also for those who receive the call to continence for the sake of the kingdom, this fundamental structure remains intact. They too are called to fruitfulness. It is not only the pleasures of intercourse that they renounce for the Kingdom. They also renounce their earthly fruitfulness: to have a family and to have children of their own. Jesus’ promise to them is a superabundant recompense precisely to *this* renunciation; theirs will be an abounding spiritual fruitfulness: “Amen, I say to you, there is no one who has given up house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God who will not receive

82. Cfr. BENEDICT XVI, *Address to Participants in the Meeting Promoted by the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family*, May 13, 2011: “It is in the family that the human person discovers that he or she is not in a relationship as an autonomous person, but as a child, spouse or parent, whose identity is founded in being called to love, to receive from others and to give him or herself to others”.

Cfr. also: L. MELINA, *Building a Culture of the Family. The Language of Love*, The Society of St. Paul - Alba House, Staten Island, NY 2011, 17-19.

an overabundant return in this present age and eternal life in the age to come” (*Lk* 18:29). It is thus the question of fruitfulness, and with this the question of life’s meaningfulness, that is at stake when it comes to life promises.

CONCLUSION

Let us briefly return to the question with which we have started. What meaning could it have to think of the marital bond “as a kind of meta-physical hypostasis beside or over the personal love of the spouses”?⁸³ It will have very little sense if we understand the promise that brings about this bond as a mere social convention (Hume) or as the expression of a will to be faithful to oneself (Nietzsche). Inasmuch, however, as a promise is essentially a pledge of fidelity *to the other* (Ricoeur, Marcel), it has the capacity of radically transforming a relationship.

The marital promise is by its very terms an unconditional pledge of fidelity. As such it turns a conditional relationship of friendship into an unconditional relationship of kinship: two friends become family. Without being something abstract floating in a Platonic heaven of ideas, the bond is still more than the personal love of the spouses understood in terms of their subjective feelings and affections. It is a particular kind of relationship that needs to be understood in a way that is analogous to other family relationships like fatherhood or motherhood. Whatever a man may happen to feel for his son, whether he loves him or disowns him, he is still the father. Fatherhood is unconditional and independent of the personal love a father feels for his son. The same holds for all other family relationships. The bond between two people is their relationship, and the relationship is more than the personal affection that two people feel for each other; it is indeed an objective reality. There is a bond that is created by descent, and there is a bond created by promises.

And of course, this is all about personal love, but one, to be sure, that is greater than mere sentiment. It is this personal love that is the reason for the exchange of the promises; desires to commit itself, to pledge

83. KASPER, *Gospel of the Family*, cit., 16.

itself for all days to come. In this sense, then, it is true: the marital bond cannot be thought of apart from the spouses' personal love, inasmuch as the bond is the objectification of this love. It is a form, a stability, an "institution" that love gives to itself. This stable, unconditional relationship is the fruit of a love that has committed itself, and we can say that it *is* a relationship of love, quite independent of the spouses' subsequent personal, subjective feelings of affection.

Finally, there is indeed and most certainly a way in which the marital bond is metaphysically hypostatized in a quite literal way, insofar as this bond is ordered to fruitfulness in the flesh. We can say that the common children are the objectification of the bond, its "hypostasis" or metaphysical substance, just as we can call the children the incarnation of their parents' love. The marital promises create a particular bond that institutes an objective relationship that is independent of the spouses' subjective feelings and that is – precisely in its permanence – a relationship of fruitful love.

SOMMARI

Italiano

Al fine di comprendere meglio la questione dello status del vincolo matrimoniale determinato dalle promesse nuziali, il presente saggio esamina per prima cosa la natura delle promesse in generale. Alcuni approcci guardano alla promessa come nient'altro che una convenzione sociale utile. Altri la vedono esclusivamente come l'esercizio della volontà. In tal modo, l'obbligo che ne consegue sarà basato unicamente su considerazioni prudenziali o su una domanda di fedeltà a se stessi. Nel tentativo di rispondere a queste sfide, si cerca di mostrare come la promessa sia intelligibile soltanto in vista dell'altro al quale è data. L'originalità della promessa matrimoniale sta nel fatto che essa forma una "comunità di destino" e nel fatto che essa è ordinata alla fecondità nella carne. La fecondità in generale, tuttavia, è propria di tutte le promesse che impegnano tutta la vita. Si sostiene che il vincolo matrimoniale, che risulta dalle promesse nuziali, è una relazione particolare incondizionata, che va al di là dei sentimenti soggettivi di affetto che gli sposi sentono o meno. Inoltre, il vincolo, istituito dalle promesse, diventa dunque un'ipostasi in senso letterale nei figli che potenzialmente nascono da esso.

English

In order better to understand the question of the status of the bond created by the marital promises, the article first investigates the nature of promises in general. Some approaches see in promising nothing but an advantageous social convention. Others look at it exclusively as an exercise of the will. The resulting obligation will then be merely based on a prudential consideration or a call to fidelity to oneself. In response, it is argued that by its very nature, a promise is intelligible only in view to the other, to whom it is given. A marital promise is specific in that it implies forming a “community of destiny” and in that it is ordered to a fruitfulness in the flesh. Fruitfulness in general, however, is the point also of all other life promises. It will be argued that the marriage bond resulting from the marital promises is the particular, unconditional relationship that goes beyond the spouses’ subjective subsequent feelings of affection. Further, the bond, instituted by the promise, is quite literally hypostatized in the children potentially born from it.

Français

Afin de mieux comprendre le status du lien conjugal déterminé par les promesses nuptiales, le présent article examine en premier lieu, la nature des promesses en général. Certaines approches regardent la promesse comme rien d’autre qu’une convention sociale utile. D’autres la considèrent exclusivement comme l’exercice de la volonté. Par conséquent, l’obligation qui en résulte sera fondée uniquement sur des considérations de prudence ou bien sur une demande de fidélité à soi-même. Dans la tentative de répondre à ces défis, l’auteur cherche à montrer comment la promesse sera intelligible seulement du point de vue de l’autre à qui elle a été donnée. L’originalité de la promesse matrimoniale réside dans le fait que celle-ci forme une “communauté de destin” et dans le fait qu’elle est ordonnée à la fécondité de la chair. La fécondité en général, cependant, est propre à toutes les promesses qui impliquent la vie toute entière. L’auteur soutient que le lien matrimonial qui vient des promesses nuptiales est une relation particulière, inconditionnelle, qui va au-delà des sentiments subjectifs de l’affect des époux qui les ressentent ou non. De plus, ce lien institué par les promesses devient donc une hypostase au sens littéral dans les enfants qui pourraient naître de ce lien.

Español

Con el fin de comprender mejor la cuestión del status del vínculo matrimonial determinado por las promesas nupciales, el presente ensayo examina, en primer lugar, la naturaleza de las promesas en general. Algunas aproximaciones ven la promesa sólo como una convención social útil. Otros la ven exclusivamente como el ejercicio de la voluntad.

En tal modo, la obligación que implica será basada únicamente sobre consideraciones prudentiales o sobre una cuestión de fidelidad a sí mismos. En el intento de responder a estos desafíos, se trata de mostrar cómo la promesa sea inteligible solamente en vista del otro al cual es dada. La originalidad de la promesa matrimonial está en el hecho que ella forma una “comunidad de destino” y en el hecho que ella está ordenada a la fecundidad en la carne. La fecundidad en general, sin embargo, es propia de todas las promesas que empeñan toda la vida. Se afirma que el vínculo matrimonial, que resulta de las promesas nupciales, es una relación particular incondicional que va más allá de los sentimientos subjetivos de afecto que los esposos sienten o no. Además, el vínculo, instituido por las promesas, se convierte en una hipóstasis en sentido literal en los hijos que potencialmente nacen de tal vínculo.

Português

A fim de compreender melhor a questão do status do vínculo matrimonial determinado pelas promessas nupciais, o presente ensaio examina, em primeiro lugar, a natureza das promessas em geral. Algumas abordagens veem a promessa só como uma convenção social útil. Outros a veem exclusivamente como o exercício da vontade. Deste modo, a obrigação que deriva, baseia-se exclusivamente nas considerações prudentiais ou na questão da fidelidade a si mesmos. Na tentativa de responder a estes desafios, procura-se demonstrar como a promessa é inteligível somente em vista do outro ao qual é dada. A originalidade da promessa matrimonial está no fato que ela constitui uma “comunidade de destino” e que está ordenada à fecundidade na carne. A fecundidade, em geral, é própria de todas as promessas que empenham a vida toda. Ratifica-se que o vínculo matrimonial, resultado das promessas nupciais, é uma relação particular incondicional que vai além dos sentimentos subjetivos de afeto que os esposos sentem ou não. Ademais, o vínculo, instituído pelas promessas, torna-se uma hipóstase, em sentido literal, nos filhos que potencialmente nascem de tal vínculo.